The CMTC Meeting Engagement

Proper Spirit Plus Sound Training

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At the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) in Germany, where European-based U.S. Army battalion task forces strive to train at least once a year, NATO missions determine the training objectives. Every battalion that trains at the CMTC therefore performs a movement to contact—more accurately, a meeting engagement.

Without question, the meeting engagement is one form of the tactical offense in which every unit should be proficient. It involves reconnaissance, security, hasty defense, and hasty attack—all of which significantly affect company level training. Because the CMTC offers the only opportunity for most battalions to maneuver as cohesive units, many units have developed "play books" or detailed plans and graphics for the way they will fight. This preparation is a result of the overriding desire to win, as well as an unfortunate drawback of the limited maneuver space at the training area; with so few mobility corridors, it is fairly simple to develop a number of courses of action. Yet the opposing force (OPFOR) still tends to overwhelm the rotating units. The OPFOR is familiar with the maneuver box and consistently tends to outmaneuver the training units because of its experience in numerous rotations. But the fact is that the OPFOR also makes mistakes, gets lost or stuck, loses communications, and experiences all of the other problems associated with a heavy unit maneuvering in close terrain.

The meeting engagement, as fought at the CMTC, is usually a traumatic experience for the soldiers of a task force training there. It is their first fight against the OPFOR, and they are generally not disposed, mentally or physically, to fight to win. Many factors contribute to the typical task force's failure to beat the OPFOR. In this article, however, I want to focus on the mind-set of the task force before its units cross the line of departure, and on what factors affect soldiers' attitudes toward fighting the meeting engagement.

CLARIFY

First, let's clarify some terminology and tactical doctrine: Field Manual (FM) 71-2, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force*, tells us that a meeting engagement is the result of a movement to contact. It is the first contact made against a moving or stationary force when the task force is not yet completely deployed. The goal is to overcome the enemy before he can react, and to do this the commander "keeps his force in a position to maneuver...."

A reminder about maneuver as the dynamic element of combat power: We move forces in relation to the enemy to secure or retain positional advantage. FM 100-5, *Operations*, outlines criteria for success in a meeting engagement: The commander must maintain the initiative, surprise the enemy, maneuver without becoming decisively engaged, and generate, focus, and sustain overwhelming combat power. Hasty attacks are usually necessary to overcome enemy attempts to concentrate or establish a defense.

What FM 71-2 offers under the heading of the meeting engagement are options for the commander to consider: bypass, hasty ambush, hasty attack, and defense. Only when you read about a hasty attack against a moving force do you gain an appreciation for the need to retain the initiative: *When two moving forces converge, the side that wins is normally the one that acts fastest and maneuvers to positions of advantage against the opponent's flank.*

The problem is that a task force at the CMTC does not usually maneuver. Almost without exception, the TF plan is to race to the critical terrain intending to trap the OPFOR. Naturally, the OPFOR—knowing the terrain far better—does not allow itself to be trapped, and usually beats the task force to that critical terrain feature anyway.

Because the task force usually plans only to defeat the OPFOR advance guard from hasty defensive blocking positions, when the task force maneuver elements are forced to react to contact, they have no real concept of how and where to maneuver to achieve positional advantage. The task force commander can only react to the enemy, who has now seized the initiative.

A TF commander can negate all of this, however, by designing—and practicing—an aggressive, maneuver-oriented hasty attack. While the concept itself is simple (being nothing more than an am-

plified react-to-contact drill), the difficulty lies in seeing the battlefield and synchronizing assets to preserve the force and destroy the enemy.

Compounding the problem for the task force and the team commanders is the nature of the CMTC terrain, which prevents units from actually seeing or supporting one another. These leaders also need to understand the advantages that can accrue to the task force by virtue of the OPFOR's echelonment of its units, even its advanced guard formation.

The approach of a sample task force (typical of many I have witnessed) will help me explain:

The task force is balanced with two tank teams and two mechanized infantry teams. Although the scout platoon is equipped with M3 Bradleys, maintenance failures have decreased their number from six to four. The task force mission is to conduct a movement to contact to destroy an enemy advance guard battalion and, on order, to establish a hasty defense.

The commander's intent is stated as follows:

Defeat an enemy advance guard motorized rifle battalion (AGMB) in an aggressive and violent movement to contact. Scouts lead, conducting a rapid forward screen focusing on key terrain, named areas of interest (NAIs), and possible enemy locations. The task force moves in a diamond formation with company teams conducting coordinated, swift movements, destroying the combat reconnaissance patrol (CRP) and forward security element (FSE) between phase line (PL) X-ray and PL Yankee and destroying the main body between PL Yankee and PL Zulu. Success is the complete isolation, suppression, and destruction of the enemy while maintaining 70 percent combat power to conduct hasty defense operations along PL Yankee.

While still in its assembly areas, the TF is attacked by a non-persistent chemical agent. The scout platoon, already forward of the TF manning a screen line, goes to mission oriented protective posture (MOPP) 4 and begins moving on the platoon's "rapid forward screen." The platoon, with only two sections, is still expected to screen a zone six to eight kilometers wide. Ten minutes after the scouts begin their forward screen, Teams A and B move out, with Team C following ten minutes behind. Although Team C, the advance guard company, has the easiest axis for movement, it is still well behind.

Instead of a diamond formation, the TF is initially in a V-formation until the TF commander directs Team A to hold until Team C picks up the lead. By 0900 the TF has been in MOPP 4 for an hour, has traversed about five kilometers, and is still not deployed for battle. The scouts are only 500 meters ahead of the task force.

The OPFOR combat reconnaissance patrol, which deployed at 0820, consists of three BMPs and one BRDM-Rkh, moving on three parallel routes. By 0900, the CRP is close to the TF. The CRP platoon leader identifies the scout platoon and an engineer vehicle, and the BRDM-Rkh that has accompanied him has spotted Teams A and C. The CRP platoon leader cannot forward his report because his radio does not operate.

One BMP of the patrol that is not moving with the others passes by Team A in his haste to come on line with the rest of the patrol. The CRP, now well into the TF area, has not identified the task force's main body or its intentions.

The MRB commander directs the FSE—composed of three T-80 tanks, ten BMPs, three BRDM/AT-5s, and 60 infantrymen—to move down the center of the battalion axis. The FSE commander organizes a forward patrol of four BMPs to move approximately 1,000 meters ahead of the FSE. The FSE moves quickly, staying in column and on good roads, then pauses at 0930 to allow the forward patrol to clear the far side of an open area and a dangerous choke point.

An hour into the movement to contact, with no reported sightings or enemy activity, the TF commander begins pushing his commanders to move faster. The area the TF is moving into does not allow the company teams to see or support one another. The TF commander wants to get to the next key terrain feature before the OPFOR does. The TF is deployed in a diamond formation, but control is complicated by terrain that puts the three lead teams in their own mobility corridors.

At 0940 Team C's lead tank platoon makes contact with the FSE forward patrol, destroying two BMPs and continuing forward until they emerge from the choke point. The rest of Team C keeps moving, engaging the OPFOR FSE as they are caught in the open. The T-80s are destroyed. The FSE commander reports his contact and immediately deploys his attached AT-5s as well as his BMPs. The surviving BMPs of the forward patrol emplace a hasty minefield behind Team C and direct artillery fires that destroy Team C's infantry platoon. The Team C commander tries to develop the situation. Because of the BMPs' flanking movement, the dismounted infantrymen, and the AT-5s, however, he does not fully grasp what he faces. The ensuing engagement costs him seven of ten M1s, but he still controls the choke point, and the enemy has only four BMPs and the AT-5s with which to contest it.

As soon as Team C reports contact with the T-80s, the TF commander knows he is in contact with the FSE. He orders Team A to establish a blocking position southeast of Team C, while Team B is brought forward to establish a support-by-fire position to back up Team C and reinforce Team A. Team B (mechanized) in the north, separated from the task force by a ridge line, is ordered to work the north flank of the TF zone, eventually establishing an observation post overlooking avenues of approach leading into the Team B area. These dispositions are complete by 1030.

The MRB commander, not sure about the TF's deployment, orders a quick reconnaissance of a covered route south of the FSE on which he can maneuver the main body. Receiving a report that the route is clear, he launches his two remaining motorized rifle companies (MRCs) in column formation at 1020. The lead OPFOR company identifies Team A at about 1040, deploys and kills four M1s and five M2s while losing three tanks and seven BMPs.

As this engagement takes place, the trail OPFOR company (MRC 1) continues on a deep envelopment into the task force rear. After rendering Team A ineffective, the lead company (MRC 3), breaks contact and follows MRC 1. Transitioning to a combat line formation, the MRB (-) turns and sweeps north behind the task force.

Such an experience would, of course, be disastrous for this task force, but no single element has contributed to the failure. Most of the task forces that train at the CMTC, in fact, experience some of the same deficiencies:

- Incomplete intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB); no offensive reconnaissance and surveillance (R&S) plan.
- Failure to relate scheme of maneuver to courses of action.
- Insufficient refinement of FS targets.
- Inability of the tactical operations center (TOC) to synchronize fires with maneuver.
- Incomplete picture of the battlefield.
- Poor radio net discipline and virtually no cross-talk between commanders.

What these task forces need to do is to refine the thought processes of the staffs during the planning stage so that they can make the most of their capabilities and capitalize on the weaknesses of the OPFOR advance guard formation.

The OPFOR View

The OPFOR at the CMTC expects the meeting engagement to be a normal function of all combat operations. As a result, it has a specific doctrinal methodology for winning a meeting engagement as reflected in its echelonment of forces. Each echelon has a specific function, and its organization reflects the task it will perform. An MRB in an advance guard formation has considerable combat capability, and the combined arms structure of the FSE and the AGMB facilitates the accomplishment of the advance guard mission.

The MRB commander conducts a detailed map study of the route of march to determine locations where he can expect to meet an advancing force and plans contingencies for each location. Supporting arms are given positions to occupy on the battlefield to reinforce long-range antitank fires. If the seizure of key terrain is possible in advance of an identified moving force, then that task is assigned as an immediate objective. In all cases, the FSE serves as the pivot point around which the AGMB will maneuver to the flanks or rear of the opponent's main body.

Anticipating the meeting engagement as a quick-tempo operation, the MRB must maintain security, gain surprise, and retain the initiative. His detailed contingency planning allows the MRB commander to concentrate on execution instead of reaction, while the assignment of subsequent objectives ensures that subordinate elements continue to support the next higher unit mission. Continuous reconnaissance from division through battalion and the time-space echelonment of his forces allow the advance guard MRB commander to fight the battle at a time and place of his own choosing.

Some Key Analysis

The task force in this example clearly had the initiative, even well after making contact with the OPFOR FSE. In a meeting engagement, the TF commander has several options, but they all hinge upon his ability to isolate the FSE and retain freedom of maneuver.

Doctrinally, the TF must mass three company teams to destroy the FSE (a reinforced combined arms team). Many units fail during the initial engagement with the FSE, and that failure is usually a function of timing and the terrain on which the opposing elements meet. In this example, the OPFOR advance guard company team had the advantage of clear fields of fire. Although half of them were rendered combat ineffective within 90 minutes, they accomplished a key task that the task force did not exploit. Failure to understand what was really happening, and where the OPFOR was, prevented the task force from executing swift, coordinated movement. This deficiency was made worse by the TF preoccupation with blocking choke points on various mobility corridors.

Commander's Intent

While there is still much disagreement concerning exactly what a commander's intent should be, most would agree that it should be a concise statement that explains why the mission has been assigned, what results are expect-

ed, how it helps future operations, and, in broad terms, how the commander visualizes the achievement of those results.

The commander's ability to communicate his intent may be the most important, because this should be clear enough to allow subordinates to execute the mission without further orders. Doing this adequately in five or six sentences is tough, and correct doctrinal terminology must be used if the concept is to be clearly understood.

In this task force example, we see qualifying adjectives in the commander's intent that do not really clarify understanding or that may, in fact, further obscure it. What is *an aggressive and violent* movement to contact? *Isolation, suppression,* and *destruction* all connote different things, yet the TF commander stipulated these as conditions for success. Likewise, the scout platoon was to conduct *a rapid forward screen focusing on key terrain, NAIs, and possible enemy locations.* (These are exclusive tasks that will be discussed later.) Clearly, a commander's intent must explain his vision, and this one does not.

Reconnaissance and Surveillance (R&S) Planning

The concepts of R&S planning are reasonably well established as a basis for planning in the defense, but R&S planning for the offense is not well understood. FM 34-2-1, *Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Reconnaissance and Surveillance and Intelligence Support to Counterreconnaissance* (June 1991), is one of the best documents yet for counterreconnaissance. It offers three pages about R&S in the offense, and the principles, planning, and execution responsibilities as articulated in this FM are critical. It is especially important that the R&S plan be derived from the IPB process, much as the decision support template (DST) is an end product of the IPB process. The R&S plan is the mechanism by which the commander's PIR/IR questions are answered. If the plan is executed well, it gets all elements of the task force involved in helping the S-2 paint the battlefield while, most important, it focuses the reconnaissance tasks for the scout platoon.

Scouts do not conduct a forward screen as a mission or task in the offense, but they do perform zone reconnaissance ahead of the lead company team. A zone reconnaissance can be performed effectively in a zone three to five kilometers wide, and is very time consuming if all the critical tasks are performed. The tasks can be assigned priorities using the R&S tasking matrix. This matrix facilitates the scout platoon leader's mission analysis and also serves to redirect the scouts' efforts, improving command and control from the task force to the scouts. Instead of looking at all possible enemy locations, key terrain, and NAIs, the scouts can now answer and seek specific indicators.

The concept of the operation is not supposed to be an exhaustive, step-by-step, multiphase description of the way the battle will be fought, but it must provide an idea of the way the company teams will be deployed. The maneuver paragraph should provide specific details of where units move or position and what they do there to support the task force mission. The same should apply for the remaining battlefield operating systems listed in paragraph three of the operations order. Tasks to each unit must specify what the tasks are and why that unit is to perform them. If the task force visualizes Team C destroying the FSE, this must be stated: "Tm C: (1) Destroy FSE." Likewise for the other elements: "Scouts, identify FSE, identify main body"; "Tm B, support Tm A, destroy one MRC."

Fire Support Issues

The effective fire support of maneuver requires staff coordination and integration in both planning and execution. If the staff has worked together in developing the DST, much of the fire supporters' planning work has been done, and the task force commander can be assured that the FS plan supports the scheme of maneuver. Likewise, if the staff is well-integrated in battle tracking during the execution phase, then fires will be applied when and where they are needed.

There are several key fire support issues to consider in planning, such as priority targets, high value targets/high payoff targets, and the assignment of priorities of fire.

A priority target is a planned target (a point on the ground on which the guns are laid when not firing). Although high value and high payoff targets are not really in the realm of fire support at the task force level, they affect fire support because the field artillery battalion supports the brigade.

The task force fire support officer (FSO) is concerned with providing responsive support to his task force; he does this by recommending the assign-

ment of priorities of fire, the allocation of priority targets, and the positioning of forward observers.

On the maneuver end, FM 71-2 offers broad guidance on how a commander can best use his fire support assets. The following statements are some examples:

- *Normally the screening force has initial priority of fires.*
- *When the enemy force is discovered, the security force... adjusts fires on the enemy... the screening force places fires... on forces maneuvering against the main body.*
- *Priority of fires is shifted to the advance guard once it is committed.*
- *Priority targets and FASCAM* [artillery-delivered minefields] *are allocated to the security force and the advance guard.*
- *Mortars are placed OPCON to* [under the operational control of] *the advance guard.*
- *Priority of support is to maneuvering elements.*

Although these statements are somewhat broad in their wording, we expect our fire support to do a lot. What we should consider is that a detailed fire plan target list may not be very current once units are in contact, and that quick fire planning will be the norm.

The decision about priority of fires is not difficult. Obviously, we want the advance guard company team to have that advantage, but how quickly can we shift it to the scout platoon when its soldiers have identified the AGMB? If we assign priority targets, where should they be? Where can we expect the FSE? Or the AGMB? Perhaps we can call the AGMB a high-value target: as soon as it is identified, all fires are shifted to neutralize or suppress it. Clearly, fire support in the meeting engagement is a point that requires a very clear commander's intent and well-established limits for its use.

Synchronization and Command and Control

Of all the functions, synchronization and command and control are the most difficult to accomplish, regardless of the mission. Synchronization is more than just the timing of the application of combat power; it is the sum of the command and control process, staff integration, battlefield reporting, and the commander's decision making. It is the term we assign to the task force commander's instincts about when to strike. Because we cannot describe—or account for—the right *feel*, we try to ensure that the task force commander gets the information he needs to make the right decision. It is therefore essential that the staff and the subordinate commanders understand their commander's intent.

The task force commander must train his staff to provide the information and support he needs to make his decisions. They must recognize which elements of the battlefield are critical in influencing the commander's decisions during a meeting engagement as well as what aspects of the OPFOR the staff should focus on to ensure that they don't miss any opportunities. The obvious points are identifying the enemy's intentions, keeping the commander apprised of friendly unit locations and strengths, reporting exactly what is seen (as opposed to what is thought), and tracking enemy movement accurately. All elements need to "see" the battlefield in the same maneuver framework.

Common checkpoints on the map serve as good maneuver control mechanisms, and all units should report OPFOR locations in relation to these check points. Two critical radio nets are the operations/intelligence (O/I) net and the task force command net. The O/I net should be used for unit position reports and other routine traffic related to operations. The TF command net must be reserved for key information between commanders, but especially for the TF commander's orders. A great deal of discipline is required to manage this, and the TOC must do it.

The TOC must be the focal point for reports and information flow. This ensures that the staff has the key information it needs to analyze the situation and make coherent recommendations to the task force commander. Generally, once the battle has begun, most information will be relayed on the command net instead of the O/I net, which will greatly hamper command and control functions if the TOC does not enforce net discipline.

The TF commander must not fix his attention on the initial engagement with the OPFOR's FSE; the decisive fight is the destruction of the main body. Substantial combat power must therefore be applied against the main body before it has a chance to deploy. The half hour between the arrival of the FSE and the arrival of the main body provides the only opportunity the task force has to wrest the initiative from the enemy.

It is absolutely essential for the scouts to identify the AGMB and maintain contact with it. Once they have identified the main body, priority of fires should shift to them so they can delay the enemy, or influence his choice of mobility corridors. In that limited time, there is little profit in firing FASCAM (artillery scattered mines); it is better to use those artillery tubes to delay or wear down the enemy. In that half hour, the task force commander must issue the fragmentary order (FRAGO), which will shape the battlefield through the maneuver of his company teams.

Some critical pieces of that FRAGO include where to mass direct fires, what fire control measures to use, who controls indirect fires, when and where smoke will be used, when company teams committed to the FSE fight break contact, where they will go afterward, and the limit of their advance. The FSO must ensure that an FO is tasked to move to a position to adjust indirect fires where the task force commander has decided to fight. He must maintain communication with the artillery through the scout FO or the attacking company/team fire support element so that he can mass artillery fires in conjunction with the task force assault. The TOC keeps the brigade informed and actively requests other combat assets: artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, close air support, attack helicopters, and the like. The scouts continue to maintain contact until the task force elements engage the main body; then they maintain surveillance for repositioning and to warn of previously unidentified enemy elements.

The meeting engagement is a tough fight, and it is even more difficult on compartmented terrain. Company com-

manders must be able to visualize the terrain in three dimensions and must see the action in relation to the task force commander's intent.

Good land navigation skills at all levels, an aggressive spirit with an offensive attitude, well-rehearsed react-to-contact drills, and a responsive command and control system are all essential to success.

Units that do not snatch the initiative from the OPFOR and instead choose to position themselves in a hasty defense are routinely destroyed in detail. Some units stop the OPFOR's forward momentum but are not in a position to gain a tactical advantage from it. Few, if any, units choose to conduct a hasty attack on the AGMB, yet this is the course of action that has the greatest chance of succeeding. All it takes is the proper spirit, a sound training program, and a determination to engage and defeat the enemy.

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JRTC Lessons Learned

An Airborne Platoon in the Defense

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During my battalion's training at the Joint Readiness Training Center earlier this year, we faced a new scenario: Perform an airborne assault on a landing strip; expand the airhead to prevent direct and observed indirect fires on the strip; and then move immediately to defend it from an armored and mechanized enemy so that follow-on forces could land.

At platoon level, this proved to be an extremely challenging mission but a highly realistic one, considering that a forced-entry airborne assault could be required in any number of locations around the world against modern or semi-modern mechanized forces.

Our mission was to establish a platoon battle position at a ford. We had to prevent the enemy armor from using the ford and push him northward into an engagement area overwatched by the company's main element. Bad weather and a rerouted airflow delayed the company's assembly, and by the time my platoon arrived at its tentative defensive position, time was short.

Rapidly preparing to defend against an enemy force that could easily outmaneuver and outshoot us presented the platoon with some problems we had not faced before. The quick answer, of course, is that this preparation was a simple question of assigning priorities of work. But a drastically reduced time window and a lack of engineer support and barrier materials forced us to reconsider how we would approach this mission.

With less than 90 minutes before we could expect the first opposing force (OPFOR) T-62 tanks and BMPs in our area, we quickly established local security and put in our crew-served weapons. We would face the OPFOR with only the weapons we had carried when we jumped in: Two M40 Dragons, six AT4 light antiarmor weapons, and 19 M21 antitank mines. My squad leaders and I understood full well that with these limited antitank assets, the amount of time we had to prepare defensive positions, and virtually nonexistent resupply for the first few days, we would have to force the enemy to fight on our terms. This meant reducing his ability to maneuver, which would force him to dismount and fight without his armor protection.

Obviously, a mechanized infantry OPFOR travels much faster and, in some ways, is more agile than the light force